

Psalm 46

The Chaos-Conquering God

Introduction

We feel secure when our world is ordered and under control. Today is a day of national mourning. At least 209 people lost their lives in the recent Victorian bushfires - the worst national disaster ever experienced in Australia. One of the mourners, Ross Buchanan, lost both his children in the fire. Whole families were incinerated.

Three weeks ago they were in their homes, feeling secure. Many had lived through bushfires before. Even when the bushfires started many people felt confident that the fires would not reach them or that they would be able to protect their homes if the fires came or that they would be able to get away in time if necessary. In the past people have been encouraged to prepare their homes against bushfires and to stay and help the firefighters to save their homes. That policy is being reviewed. Victorian Premier, John Brumby commented, "There were many people who had done all of the preparations, had the best fire plans in the world and tragically it didn't save them."

Surrounded by Chaos

Psalm 46 begins with a vision of chaos: *"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."* In the movie, *A View to a Kill*, a sociopath, Max Zorin, conjures up a plan to dominate the world computer market by destroying Silicon Valley. He places a powerful bomb in a strategic location to create a massive earthquake that will cause the whole of San Francisco and the Silicon Valley to fall into the sea. But as you watch the movie you don't fear because James Bond is our source of strength, our help in trouble. We do not fear, knowing James Bond will thwart the villain. He will prevent the earthquake from occurring. He will prevent the earth from giving way. He will prevent the mountains falling into the heart of the sea.

Look intently at the opening words of this psalm: *"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."* Why don't God's people fear? Because God is like James Bond? Will God prevent the earthquake from occurring? Will God prevent the earth from giving way? Will God prevent the mountains falling into the heart of the sea? No! The psalmist says, *"We will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea."* Our peace and security does not depend on God preventing chaos. God does not have to act like James Bond to set our hearts at rest. No! Our peace and security is experienced when chaos is all around us, when the earth does give way, when the mountains do fall into the heart of the sea.

When I was 12 years old my family once holidayed in a caravan park next to the beach in Cornwall, England. One evening, my stepfather took me to go out with him in a rowing boat. We trudged down to the water dragging the boat behind us. It was pitch dark. I couldn't see my nose in front of my face. I could hear massive waves crashing on the shore. We entered the water. Suddenly the boat and myself were picked up by a great wave. I found myself pinned beneath it as wave after wave pounded in,

panicking, gasping for breath. My stepfather found me in the dark and lifted the boat off me.

The sea is something to be feared; something to be treated with great respect. Normally, the sea keeps its bounds. In some parts of the world they experience tsunamis from time to time, massive tidal waves which refuse to stay within limits and sweep on to the land breaking death and destruction to all that lies in its path. In the Bible whenever you think about the ultimate threat to life and safety you think of the sea. In the ancient world sailors did not sail out into the deep blue sea. They stuck to the coastlines so that if a major storm was brewing they could head straight for shore.

In Psalm 46 the greatest fears of God's people are confronted. That's why the image of the threatening waters of chaos is used. Imagine if something went radically wrong with the world. Suddenly, the seas no longer stay within their bounds. Instead the seas come crashing down onto the land and swallow it all up. Then the world ends up back where it began. In the state of chaos described at the very beginning of the Bible: *"Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep"* (Gen 1:2). In Psalm 46 God's people imagine what would happen if the whole earth was submerged underneath the raging sea. What a confession we make as the people of God: *"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear even if a state of chaos is all around us."*

But when God's people think about the earth disappearing beneath the sea they are not really thinking of a natural disaster at all. As the psalm goes on to make clear, the real threat is political in nature. God's people in Jerusalem are surrounded by hostile nations. This is brought out in verse 6: *"Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall."* God's people don't expect the Mediterranean Sea to submerge the entire city of Jerusalem. This is just imagery. But there is a real threat posed by hostile nations that want to conquer Jerusalem and take it over. The world is in turmoil. God's people see the nations around them raging against each other in war. They see kingdoms falling in the midst of warfare. What hope has a small kingdom like Israel got in such a world? What hope has a tiny city like Jerusalem got if it is attacked by say the mighty Assyrians?

Nations are in uproar as we sit here this morning. Many African nations are ravaged by terrible civil wars. For example, God's people are constantly under threat in Sudan. What would happen if the Muslim nation of Indonesia decided to wage a war against Australia funded by Saudi dollars? Imagine if there was a Muslim super power of the same scale as America set upon taking over Australia.

Psalm 46 is the psalm to cling to when war rages about you. For the vast majority of this world's Muslims regard America as "the great Satan." As someone who lived in a Muslim neighbourhood in Pakistan for seven years I know the vast majority of Muslims saw the war against Iraq as Christians against Muslims. The direct result of this is that Muslims end up taking out their fury and frustration on Christians in their own lands. Christians in Indonesia and in Middle Eastern countries are in immense danger.

Peace Amid Chaos

What is it like for Christians to live in a hostile world? We need to grasp the significance of verses 4-5: *"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God*

will help her at break of day." In the midst of a world at war God's people knew they were safe in Jerusalem precisely because this was God's own city, the place where he himself was present with them. As they confess in verse 7: "*The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*" Jerusalem is safe and secure because that is where the temple of God is located, "*the holy place where the Most High dwells.*"

The Yarra river may flow through Melbourne, even if it does so upside down, but no actual river flows through Jerusalem and no river has ever done so. So just as the raging seas of verses 2-3 are metaphorical for hostile nations so the river flowing through Jerusalem is also a metaphor. The idea is that because God dwells in the temple in Jerusalem, his presence is enjoyed all over Jerusalem. Just as a river might break into streams and bring life-giving water in all directions, so the presence of God brings life and blessing to all who live in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the city of joy because the rivers of the water of life "*make glad the city of God.*" Just as the rivers of life flowed out from the Garden of Eden to bring blessing to all the world so God makes sure that we enjoy the richness of his blessing as we live in his presence and under his rule.

Where is our security to be found when our lives are threatened by the chaos of unwelcome suffering? There is always one place where we are always safe and secure, namely the presence of God. As we live our lives in the presence of God, as we enjoy the presence of God in our lives, then we remain safe and secure when all around is in chaos and confusion.

The God Who Conquers Chaos

A marvellous statement is made in verse 5: "*God will help her [Jerusalem] at break of day.*" Dawn was often the time when attacks against cities were launched. But the psalmist is saying more than that God will defend his city and his people when the enemy launches his attack. The phrase "at break of day" goes back to Exodus 14:27. It brings to mind the vicious Egyptian soldiers, passing between the divided waters of the Red Sea in hot pursuit of Israel, with full intent to destroy them. It was at "*break of day*" that Moses stretched out his arm over the sea and the divided waters rapidly swirled back to their original course, drowning the entire Egyptian army in the process. In Exodus 15 the Red Sea is likened to the waters of primeval chaos. So the promise "*God will help her at break of day*" is also an assurance that God controls the forces of chaos and will immerse his enemies in chaos.

We will not always have to live in a world of threat. That's the significance of verses 8-10: "*Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."* The important words here are God's own words, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" I memorized this verse when I was a young Christian and I found them a great encouragement. I was living in Christchurch, New Zealand, at the time. Sometimes I would walk to Hyde Park in Christchurch and find a quiet spot where I could sit in the sunshine, look at the flowers and the lush greenness of God's creation around me. I would sit back, relax and recall to mind Psalm 46:10: "*Be still and know that I am God.*" My heart and mind would be stilled and I would drink in the wonder of who God is.

What I was doing was a legitimate use of Psalm 46:10, but I had not grasped what this statement really means in Psalm 46 itself. You have to line up verse 10 with verse 6: "*Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*" It is the voice of God which brings an end to the chaos of this world. It is when God speaks that the noise of the raging nations is brought to an end. It is when God rebukes the chaos and says, "*Be still, and know that I am God*" that we cease to hear the clamour of threatening forces and find that all of our senses are filled with the greatness of God, seeing him "*exalted among the nations...exalted in the earth.*" I had always thought the words "*Be still, and know that I am God*" were gentle words. I always imagined God was speaking softly to me, kind of saying, "Sit back and relax." Now I know that these are words of power, words of rebuke.

I'm sure you recognize these words, for they are the very same words Jesus used to demonstrate he is fully God. Amid the chaos of the raging sea and the howling wind Jesus stood in a boat and he rebuked the wind and the waves, saying, "*Be still.*" In our own personal lives our minds and hearts are sometimes filled with shouts and turmoil, with chaos and confusion. We need to hear the Lord's rebuke to that world of chaos, "*Be still, and know that I am God.*" In a world where we continue to have wars and rumours of wars, we await the great day when Jesus returns. On that day we will hear the voice of Jesus again say with awesome majesty, "Be still." On that day no Muslim will ever again doubt that Jesus is indeed God. On that day Jesus will be exalted among the nations, exalted in the earth. On that day every knee will bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. On that day wars will cease to the ends of the earth. On that day the bow and the spear will be shattered forever. On that day the shields will be burned with everlasting fire. And we will live in perfect peace in his presence forever more.